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Reagan passes the buck on the Beirut bombings

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First, he tried putting it in soft focus. While the cameras were recording the smoke and blood and stench and anguish of the most recent bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, President Reagan shrugged resignedly: Anyone who has ever tried getting a kitchen finished on time would understand why the gates weren't up at the embassy, he said.

That didn't play well at all. And now the President is trying another tack, this one meaner in spirit and even more divorced from reality. In so many words, he is saying it's all Jimmy Carter's fault.

It is all Jimmy Carter's fault, he told students in a speech Wednesday at Bowling Green University in Ohio, because of "the near destruction of our intelligence capability" in the years preceding the Reagan administration.

Well, hogwash.

That is a dodge plain and simple — one of the worst of an administration that has shown incompetence more often than not in implementing Middle East policy.

It is a dodge, number one, because it is more false than true. While intelligence budgets are widely agreed to have been reduced during the early 1970s under Republican administrations, it is just as widely agreed that they underwent a revival during the Carter years.

It is a dodge, number two, because it is highly doubtful that intelligence alone — or the lack of it — was the overriding reason that first one embassy, then a barracks full of sleeping Marines and finally the embassy annex in East Beirut have been bombed by terrorists.

The real fault has been two-fold — a failure to resolve the ancient and intensely complex political and religious rivalries in Lebanon and an obvious failure to provide adequate security

for Americans serving there. (Both a congressional committee and the Defense Department warned months ago that U.S. installations in Beirut would continue to be vulnerable without secure entry barriers — advice that was being acted upon tragically late.)

Mr. Reagan's sloughing of responsibility, though, is mostly a dodge because it is a dodge — buck-passing of the crassest, most cynical sort. It is nearly four full years since Mr. Carter sat in the White House, and it is high time that Mr. Reagan ran on his own record, not against a Jimmy Carter whose peace efforts in the Middle East tower over Mr. Reagan's diplomatic snafus there.

It was, perhaps, Senate Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia who best characterized Mr. Reagan's weaseling on the bombing. He called it "the ultimate disappearing act."

"It is one thing to be able to stage-manage walking away from these disasters," he said. "But it's another to try and leave the impression that they didn't even happen on your watch."

Mr. Reagan is good at the ceremony and sympathy that accompany these sad episodes. He is good at denouncing international terrorists and at eulogizing the brave Americans who have died at their hands in Beirut.

But he has not been good at assembling a policy that might reduce tensions in Lebanon, and he has not been good at shoring up the defenses that might protect the lives of Americans serving there. Policy-making and protecting American lives, to a large extent, are what being President is all about.

The buck, in case Mr. Reagan has forgotten, stops in the Oval Office. It has been his job — not Jimmy Carter's — to preserve and protect U.S. interests in Lebanon. No amount of Teflon is going to change that.